

2002: A Sleep Odyssey

Oliver Taplin

Those who know Stanley Kubrick's (highly recommended) film *2001: A Space Odyssey* will remember how all but one of the men onboard the huge spacecraft Discovery, heading for Saturn, lie asleep in a sort of state of hibernation. Is the space Odyssey subtly alluding to its Homeric predecessor? In the middle of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus makes an important voyage in a similar state of deep sleep. This is the last leg of his many journeys on his long way home, the voyage from the lush half-real/half-fantasy land of the Phaeacians to the realities of rocky Ithaca. It takes one night onboard a high-speed Phaeacian ship guided by some sort of superpilot which navigates automatically. As king Alcinous told Odysseus:

*Our ships shall transport you there, calculating their
own course.
For we Phaeacians have no use for steersmen or rudders.
Unlike all ordinary craft, the ships themselves can sense
the thoughts of their sailors, and know with their own
minds
the cities and countries of all people throughout the earth.*
(8.556–60—all translations are my own)

And when Odysseus first lands on his home island after twenty years away – an exciting and emotional moment, or so you would expect – there is an extraordinary twist: he is still fast asleep.

*The Phaeacian sailors knew this cove, and rowed so
hard
that they beached their boat to half its whole length.
Then they disembarked; and first they lifted Odysseus
from the deck,
all wrapped around in his bed of blanket and linen,
and set him down on the sand still tightly bound in sleep.*
(13.115–19)

The poem has been carefully preparing for this sleep. Right back in Book 7 king Alcinous promises Odysseus transport home, but specified that he would be asleep during the journey. And when queen Arete gives him a chest full of gold and fine fabrics, she insists that he should keep it securely closed so that no one can tamper with it:

*while you sleep securely on the vessel conveying you
home.*

It's that man again

When the time comes for Odysseus to climb aboard the Phaeacian ship that will take him home, the sleep – so carefully anticipated – is now fully narrated:

*When this procession reached the shore, the crew took
over
the treasure and provisions, and stowed them onboard
the boat.
And on deck at the stern they laid down the blanket and
linen
ready for Odysseus, so that he could sleep peacefully.
He himself embarked, and lay down there without a word.
The sailors sat in their places, the rope was slipped
from its stone,
and as they rowed strongly they flung the spray from
their blades.
Meanwhile, soft sleep drifted over the eyes of Odysseus,*

*wonderfully sweet, unwakeable, a sleep next door to
death.*
(13.70–80)

Then, after telling how swift and true the ship cut through the waves, the passage concludes:

*Onboard she was bearing that man with a god-like mind,
who had already endured all sorts of trials and troubles,
both in battles on land and crossing the stressful sea.
But now he slept in peace, forgetful of all past pain.*

*At that time when the morning star hangs in the sky,
shining to announce the first flush of dawning day,
the vessel from over the sea arrived at the island of
Ithaca.*
(13.89–95)

There are two internal clues in these lines here to help explain why this profound sleep is so important within the poem. First, there are those echoes in lines 89–92 of the four opening lines of the whole *Odyssey*: 'that man', 'endured trials and troubles', 'in battle', and 'crossing the sea'. Secondly, 'a sleep next door to death' suggests that this is a kind 'near-death experience'. Odysseus is in transition between two stages of his life, between his protracted and far-flung wanderings (first port of call, the dreamy Lotus-Eaters ...) and his future on his real, tough little island of Ithaca.

The division between book 13, lines 92 and 93 is the most important single division within the construction of the entire *Odyssey*. It is, in a very real sense, the division between a Part One and a Part Two. Odysseus has to make the transition between those two halves of the poem, but he makes it in a sleep close to death.

Human hibernation

Is the Homeric echo in the title of *2001: A Space Odyssey* just a routine cliché? Any tabloid journalist, after all, will call any prolonged journey or ordeal an 'odyssey'. When the writer, Arthur C. Clarke, and film maker, Stanley Kubrick, began to collaborate in 1964 on the project that would materialise in 1968 into both the film and the book of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, did their use of the word 'odyssey' go any deeper than that?

There is one direct reference to Homer in the book. David Bowman is one of the two men who take it in turns to operate the vast spacecraft Discovery on its year-long journey to Saturn. He has long periods of time to kill and 'wanders at will through the ship's inexhaustible electronic library'. He reads about great various voyages of exploration. 'And he began to read the *Odyssey*, which of all books, spoke to him most vividly across the gulfs of time.' As he does this the ship is being navigated and controlled by the supercomputer, HAL 9000: is HAL a recollection of the Phaeacians' self-guiding ships, which can sense the thoughts of their sailors? And is the name Bowman an allusion to Odysseus' skill as an archer?

At any one time four out of the five-man crew of Discovery are in a state of 'artificially-induced human hibernation'. Once they have completed their mission, they will all five go into hibernation (under the tender care of HAL) for as long as it takes for a rescue ship to come and fetch them – 'for all of them the clock would have stopped'. Before they set off, they practised

this hibernation, and Dave's experience is narrated:

'Though he had come back safely from the furthest borders of sleep, and the nearest borders of death, he had been gone only a week'.

'The nearest borders of death' sounds very like *Odyssey* 13, line 80. I suggest that in the phrase 'The *Odyssey* which of all books spoke to him most vividly', Arthur C. Clarke is acknowledging the inspiration for some of the crucial ideas of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Not rounded by a sleep

There are other significant places in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus sleeps. Some of them are good sleeps, for example, when he sleeps on a proper comfortable bed in the palace of Alcinous, or on a rough but hospitable bed of brushwood covered with skins at the farm of Eumaeus. Some are bad sleeps, like the time when his men open the bag of the winds, or when they kill the cattle of the Sun. And some are interestingly half-and-half, like bedding down naked under a pile of leaves; or restless on the porch of his own house the night before he will have to confront the Suitors.

But we all always know that the poem is leading towards Odysseus' sleep in one particular bed: the bed that he shares with his wife Penelope. We certainly are made to wait for this, but at last he and Penelope go to bed together, make love, and then tell each other their stories. And eventually:

That was the last story he told her, before sweet sleep relaxed his limbs and loosened his heart from its stress.
(23.342–3)

It seems that in ancient times some scholars believed that Homer's original *Odyssey* ended when Odysseus and Penelope first go to bed. And some modern scholars have followed this lead, reckoning the poem is better without the various events that come after that long-awaited climactic moment. But no one has ever suggested that the moment when Odysseus finally sleeps in his own bed should be the end of the poem. Might it not make a good conclusion?

The comparison with *2001: A Space Odyssey* helps me to decide against this idea. The modern science fiction is interestingly both similar and different. Dave Bowman eventually arrives, after losing his companions – that is, like Odysseus – and without the help of the murderous HAL. But his journey, controlled by some cosmic engineering far beyond human comprehension, does not bring him home, nor is there any Penelope waiting for him. He has come to some metropolis of the incorporeal beings who control and monitor the galaxies. Once he is there, machinery temporarily creates an artificial earth-like environment for him. He is in a kind of hotel room:

*'The comfortable bed, and the instinctive wisdom of the body conspired together against his will.
He fumbled for the light switch, and the room was plunged into darkness. Within seconds, he had passed beyond the reach of dreams.
So, for the last time, David Bowman slept'.*

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But this is a kind of trick. It is not the end of the book, and the sleep is not the sleep of death, but the beginning of a kind of mysterious cosmic resurrection which will return Dave to our Earth as some kind of super-intelligence.

Similarly, when Odysseus sleeps towards the end of the *Odyssey*, it is a kind of 'false ending'. His sleep beside Penelope is not the end of his trials, and it is not the sleep of death. As in so many other ways the *Iliad* offers a telling contrast. The *Iliad* as a whole ends, of course, with the final laying-to-rest of Hector:

So they finished the funeral of the breaker of horses

Hector.
(24. 804).

But it is significant that the *Iliad* also leaves Achilles asleep:

*But Achilles slept sound in the inner recess of his tent,
and by his side she lay, the beautiful blush of Briseis.*
(24.675–6)

Achilles is enjoying what little life is still left for him, because, as he knows all too well, he will not live long. Maybe one of the reasons why the *Odyssey* does not end with sleep is that Odysseus still has many years to live. A sleep that ended the whole poem would have to be like the sleep that ended the first half of the poem – 'a sleep next door to death' – but even more so. The ending of the *Odyssey* straggles strangely, and does set us some very difficult problems of interpretation. But it should not end with Odysseus in bed and turning out the light: it is important, I think, that, in contrast to dead Hector, and to doomed Achilles, Odysseus should be last seen alive and wide awake.

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